

## On The Last Intellectuals

### Murray Bookchin

Jacoby's book is long overdue. If the New Left had merely died in America, it could be viewed with nostalgia and perhaps critical misgivings. Indeed, something could have been learned from its demise: e.g., what is a radicalism suitable for the US and its best traditions? Alas, this has not been the case. In England, a leftist movement that is still mired in 1930s radicalism can still sing "The Workers' Flag is Deepest Red" without seeming ridiculous. In Germany, where a Green Party has supplanted the traditional socialisms with a social ecology movement, radicalism still appeals to a broad "constituency" that ranges from ordinary protesters to outright revolutionaries. In America, however, the "movement" has either migrated to Nicaragua, where it seeks a miniature version of the Russian and Chinese "revolutions," or it has retreated into academic ghettos, where it is rapidly becoming diluted by the vapors of post-modernism and other forms of Yuppie nihilism.

There is very little I can add to Jacoby's account of how the Old Left differed from an aging New Left by becoming the very professoriat against which it inveighed a generation ago. Nor can I add to Jacoby's account of how so many New York Jewish intellectuals swerved to the right and of how changes in the city and the loss of its bohemia destroyed its rich political culture.

Far too many of my New York Jewish comrades tried to find a cultural niche in American life. It took many of us a long time to appreciate the immigrant world of our parents, even though we were thoroughly steeped in it. For example, the "Russian Question" obsessed us. All attempts by the CPUSA to create the illusion that "Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism" were made in audibly foreign accents. The inability of the Old Left to make contact with uniquely American radical traditions yielded tragic results. It was the Huey Longs, the Father Coughlins, the Silver Shirts, and the Christian Front that were to capitalize on American populist traditions. The upsurge of the workers' movement, together with massive agrarian unrest, was either permitted to ebb or be institutionalized by Roosevelt and John L. Lewis with the Communists' help.

But there was a redemptive side to the Old Left as a whole. Radical students commonly left school, high schools as well as colleges, to help the CIO in its organizing drives. If we looked old enough, we were ferried across the Hudson River into northern New Jersey where we leafleted plants and were

slugged by goons along with the union professionals. About Marxism, an embattled credo rather than an academic discipline, we were very well informed in comparison with the professoriat of the 1980s, not only at classes from the Workers' School on East 13th Street and at the Rand School off Union Square but in study groups and regular "educationals" that formed an integral part of our weekly meetings.

Who were these people outside educational institutions of any kind? They were not on the staffs of *Partisan Review*, *The New Leader*, or *The New Masses*. Nor did they even *think* of holding jobs in educational institutions, which (it was taken for granted) were "bourgeois" and utterly corrupt. For the most part, they later faded into ordinary, more pedestrian lifeways in the 1950s.

That this Old Left generation dissolved is more than understandable. No generation was more buffeted by betrayals, defeats, and manipulation than the thirties radicals. The bitterness engendered by Stalinism can almost be taken alone as an explanation of why so many Old Left intellectuals drifted to the right. Putting aside its cruder Stalinist luminaries, the Old Left *was part of a clearly definable historical era*: the rise, fruition, and decline of the labor movement. The period extending from the 1848 Paris insurrection, when red flags first appeared on barricades, to the May 1937 insurrection in Barcelona, when red-and-black flags were ignominiously lowered because of commands issued by self-styled anarchist leaders, forms a very distinct and complete historical epoch. The New Left, by contrast, never had a history of its own. "Revolution" never went beyond media theatrics, and the "streets" were mainly a stage.

Here, perhaps, Jacoby's book may need some emendation. If he means radical "intellectuals," there is a void to be filled. *Where* radical "intellectuals" decide to go when overall conditions for radicalism evaporate is a *moral* decision. In the 1950s, for example, it was impossible to believe that radicalism had a future. Eisenhower, even more than McCarthy, seemed to signify that an *era* had come to an end. There was no history to be made once the classical revolutionary epoch had been replaced by one of philistine stability. The cleavage between the Old and the New Left was unavoidable in that an *historical* — not merely ideological — gap separated them. Ironically, the two "lefts" were not to make contact until they met as academic colleagues.

What, then, was needed to link a body of radical intellectuals with public life? I answered this question in the "Special Symposium on the Role of Intellectuals in the 1980s" in *Telos* 50. There I questioned the meaning of the word "intellectuals." The engaged "intellectuals" of the thirties, were more like a revolutionary *intelligentsia* than like bookish theorists. The word *intelligentsia*, is of Russian origin and designates what we call "intellectuals" who form a de-institutionalized element in society that maintains its continuity regardless of periods of reaction. Characteristically, the Russian *intelligentsia* withstood periods of sweeping repression. Lenin capitalized on the *intelligentsia's* idealism, renamed it a "party" of "professional revolutionaries," and ultimately bureaucratized it

within an apparatus. Stalin, who never could become part of it, detested it and tried to annihilate it.

To the degree that Jacoby's "last intellectuals" were truly active in public life, they were members of an *intelligentsia* rather than "intellectuals." Like *The Contemporary* in Russia, which provided a voice for Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, and their like, they worked through dangerously critical magazines and often created causes, not merely attached themselves to them. It was largely the Paris *intelligentsia*, for example, that disinterred the Dreyfus case from the closed files of the military and made it into a worldwide scandal in flat defiance of French public opinion and even of the French Socialist Party. It was mainly the Polish *intelligentsia* that kept the flame of Polish independence alive in the darkest hours of Tsarist oppression. It was the Russian *intelligentsia* that challenged Lenin in the name of democracy and an uncompromising commitment to socialist ideals.

What has always given flesh and blood to the *intelligentsia* has been its own sense of community and identity, its collective power to resist dissolution by institutionalized forms of culture, and, above all, its sense of mission. These traits were clearly present in the thirties. One thinks particularly of John Dewey's effort to provide Trotsky with a forum during the ugliest period of the Moscow purge trials, at a time when liberals had joined with the Stalinists to silence the Bolshevik leader in the American press. The Dewey Commission, as it was called, was a palpable presence during its hearing at Coyacon, Mexico, where Trotsky lived out his last exile, and its verdict of "Not Guilty!" sent an electrifying message through the entire liberal-Stalinist establishment. Indeed, Trotsky himself, for all his political errors, was the avatar of the radical "intellectual," a totally mobilized personality who dared to challenge an entire empire until a pickax was buried in his skull.

In any case, something of an *intelligentsia* existed in the U.S. during the 30s and tried to carry on in the decades that followed. In present-day documentaries, however, what is being romanticized is not the figure of a Dewey, much less of a Charles Beard, who dared to question the liberal account of Roosevelt's attempt to bring America into WWII. Rather, it is the functionaries — the union organizers of the CIO and old communists who remained "faithful" to their party through all its changes of positions. So it is entirely possible that even the standards that distinguish an *intelligentsia* from academic intellectuals will begin to fade, possibly together with the very word *intelligentsia*.

If an *intelligentsia* were to be revived, it would have to be the result of a supreme moral commitment, not merely a reaction to changed social conditions. It would have to learn how to protest, acquire the "bad manners" that have been replaced by a nasalized, stately "discourse," and learn how to hate injustice — traits that are so notably absent in the academic world. The lack of solid theoretical foundations in the so-called "new social movements" being

celebrated today renders such a revival unlikely. Thus, one cannot be overly optimistic about the formation of an *intelligentsia* at a time when capitalism has permeated every facet of life. Not only has Jacoby written an admirable description of a problem; he may well have carved a memorial to a tradition that is already being forgotten. My only concern is that this book may become another "resource" (despite its author's wishes) for research projects in which academic "lefties" will earn another bouquet of PhDs.

## *Coroners in the Academy*

Andrew Feffer

During the past seven years the right has gradually taken over public discourse concerning intellectual life in America. Self-hating liberal academics now add their voices to the chorus, as Allan Bloom and other neo-conservatives rage against the sins of higher education. Falling in lock step behind Secretary of Education William Bennett, administrators and academic committees have joined a crusade for "accountability" that promises students no less than urine tests and civics exams upon graduation. With each new Book-of-the-Month Club selection, with each "official" report on the dismal state of historical knowledge among seventeen year olds, the airwaves and newspapers fill with interviews of seemingly benign and level-headed neo-conservative "experts," who warn us that the nation's culture is weakened and defenseless, thanks to rock music and a lack of vigilance on the part of liberals.

Neo-conservative concern for the quality of higher education in America is at best disingenuous. To be sure, we all bemoan cultural impoverishment and the left has long complained of the demise of historical consciousness. But, the right concerns itself less with a decline in critical thinking than with the dominance of certain ideas they dislike. The problem for Bloom is not so much that college students know no history, but that they understand it in a certain way, not that students have no culture, but that they embrace cultural traditions which offend conservative taste. Cultural relativism and liberal tolerance, the right argues, have so eroded absolute values that the nation's children, misled by the "antinomians" in charge of the academy, no longer believe in constitutional principles or the rule of law. The contextual interpretation